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Free play

Free play, as opposed to imagined play, i.e. structured play organized and led by adults, is very much a non-topic everywhere, even though the isolated, concerned voice appears now and then. In his 2005 book, “Last Child in the Woods”, Richard Louv gave a name to the problem caused by imagined play. He called it "nature-deficit disorder." We might laugh at the name and the explanation but it reflects a sad, sad state of affairs and we are seeing it in T&T.

He came up with the term, he said, to describe “an environmental ennui flowing from children's fixation on artificial entertainment rather than natural wonders” and those who are “obsessed with computer games or are driven from sport to sport”. These children, he maintains, miss the “restorative effects that come with the nimbler bodies, broader minds and sharper senses that are developed during random running-around at the relative edges of civilization”.

Basically the disorder is about children spending too much time inside rather than outside and the effects of this. It's about children who are not allowed to do their own thing, do what they want, play freely, without an adult looking over their shoulder. It's the result of a lack of free play” which is indispensable for developing hearts, souls and minds.

According to “Play England”, free play is children “choosing what they want to do, how they want to do it and when to stop and try something else. Free play has no external goals set by adults and has no adult imposed curriculum. Although adults usually provide the space and resources for free play and might be involved, the child takes the lead and the adults respond to cues from the child”.

Through free play children: “explore materials and discover their properties; use their knowledge of materials to play imaginatively; express their emotions and reveal their inner feelings; come to terms with traumatic experiences; maintain emotional balance, physical and mental health, and well-being; struggle with issues such as birth and death, good and evil, and power and powerlessness; develop a sense of who they are, their value and that of others; learn social skills of sharing, turn-taking and negotiation; deal with conflict and learn to negotiate; solve problems, moving from support to independence; develop communication and language skills; repeat patterns that reflect their prevailing interests and concerns; practise, develop and master skills across all aspects of development and learning”.

Notice the emphasis by Louv on “driven from sport to sport”. It’s not the same thing is it, to walk or bicycle from home to the Savannah, where you have been running around freely, as to be driven or taken from home to a sheltered playing field and worse, to where an adult then tells you what to do, where to stand, what to practice, when to run, where to sit and what to drink.

That’s not play, that is drill. That is not developing your senses, that is being schooled a particular way. That is not learning to take care of yourself, that is following orders under heavy manners. That is not being confronted with different scenarios and having to make choices, that is being told what to do. That is not learning anything about the street and so remaining vulnerable to the denizens who live on the street, that is giving up the street.

Fifty years ago, a young nine year old boy could get up in the morning in July in Woodbrook or Belmont or St. James, eat breakfast (cocoa, bread with cheese), go outside and disappear for the day with a group of boys his age, and nobody worried, as long as you came home that night for supper (cocoa, bread and sardine). Occasionally your mother, if she needed you urgently, would phone around for you and since everybody knew you, unless you were in the middle of the Savannah or up somebody’s guava tree, someone would soon shout out to you to get “your little arse back home, yuh mudder looking for you!”

Those days of free-range childhood seem to be over. Some years ago an interesting study came out of the UK. Some one began looking at the range of play of a typical English family’s son and found in one village a classical answer. In the home there lived a grandfather, father and grandson. When the grandfather was a boy, it was worked out that he typically ranged up to 10 miles from his house. His son started the decline but still managed to find himself several miles from home in the course of his wandering. The grandson, born in 1990, was forbidden to play more than 100 yards from the same house.

The results are there to see: obese kids; bored kids; depressed kids. Even scared kids.

We should be trying to restore childhood to the unplugged state of casual outdoor play that we all remember from our own youth. The passive watching of a video screen does not simulate the uncertainty and risk, however minor, that makes natural exploration bracing.

Of course it's hard to let children roam too freely. The news media have spooked parents with reports of child abductions and murders even though almost all of these occur within the home. We've become conditioned to live in fear. The solution is to create safe zones where children can run around on their own. We need to take back the streets. And let the children occupy them.

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